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Views on Civil Government · 1850

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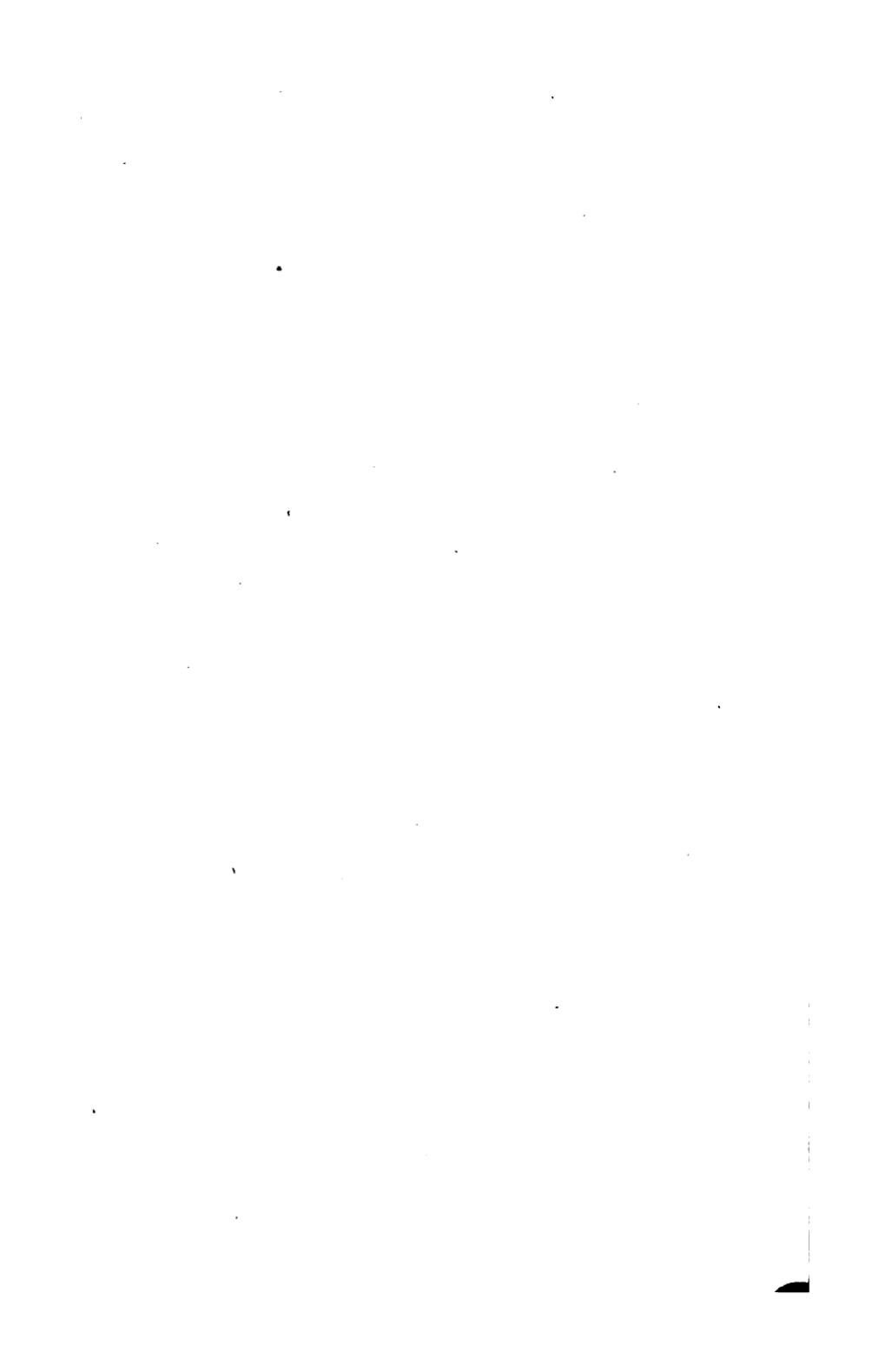


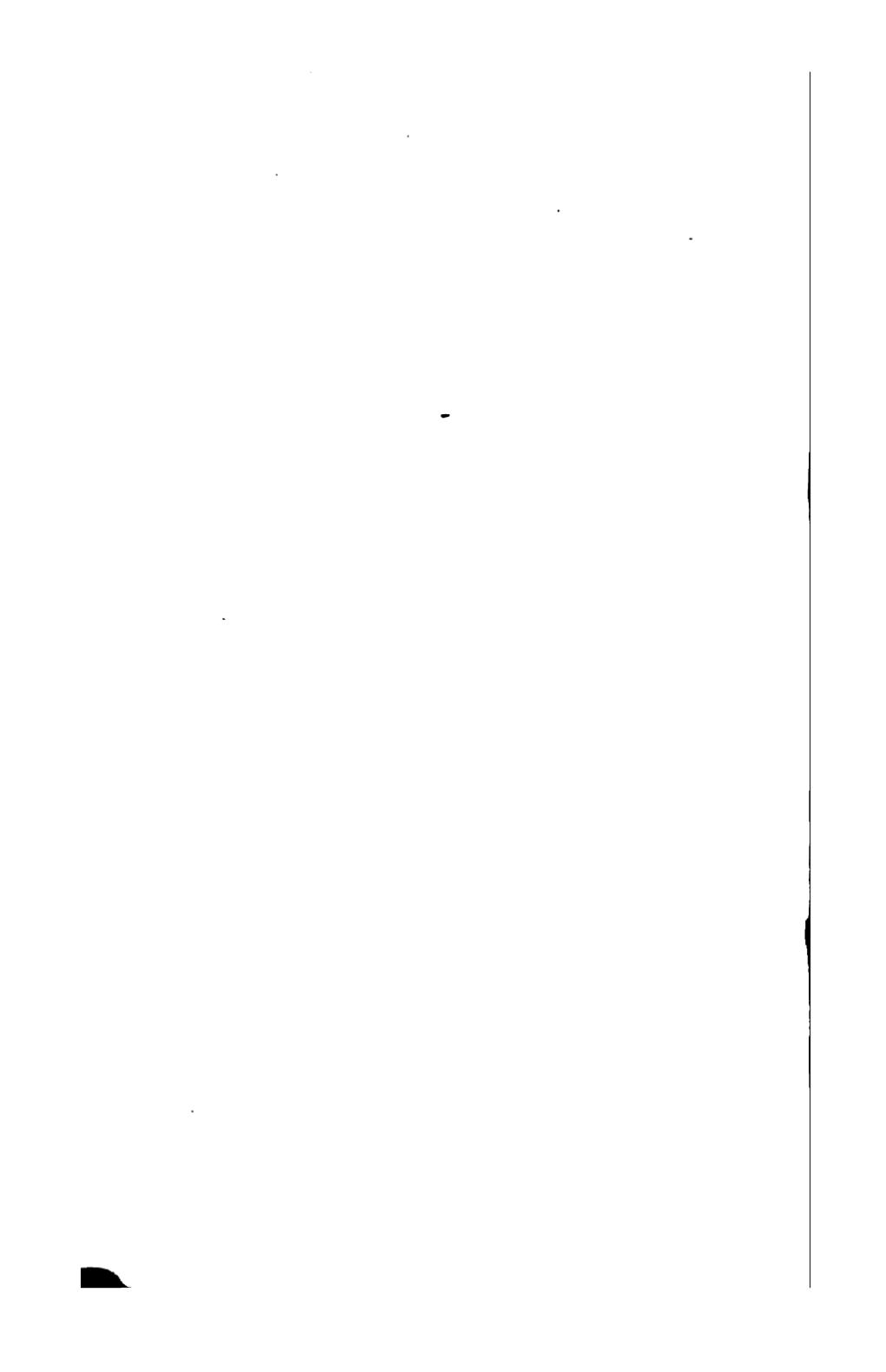
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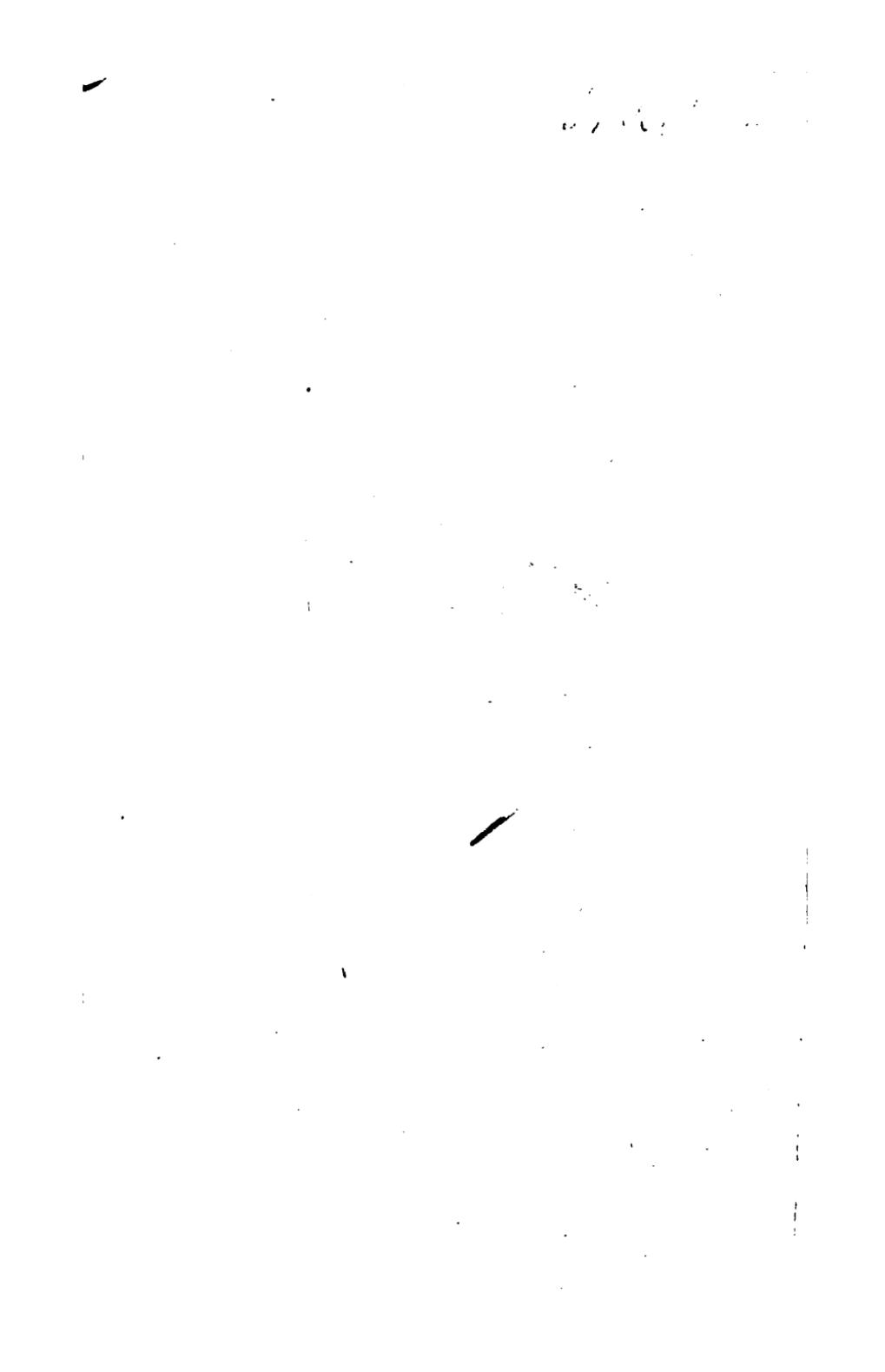
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# VIEWS

OF

## THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

IN RELATION TO

THE  
CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

## CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

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PROVIDENCE:

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## VIEWS ON CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

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THE Representatives of the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends for New England, being impressed with the importance of diffusing among their own members and in the christian community correct information on some points of our faith and practice, have believed it right for them at this time to issue this address, to the end that the principles that we have ever maintained in relation thereto, since our origin as a people, may be faithfully supported by us, and clearly understood by others.

It is a time of much excitement in civil and religious society, and we are earnestly desirous that our members may individually seek to manifest on all occasions a meek and quiet spirit, ever demeaning themselves as good citizens, prompt in the support of right order, and in all things adorning the doctrines we profess. This has at all times been the concern of our Society. Acknowledging God as the alone Supreme Ruler of the conscience, they have been ever ready cheerfully to submit to all the laws and ordinances of men that did not conflict therewith, and to contribute to the support of well-ordered civil government.

We do indeed believe that war and fighting are contrary to the Divine Will, and unlawful for us as christians—and we cannot, therefore, in any way, countenance or contribute to military operations.

We believe that, under the Government of the

Prince of Peace, swords are to be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks and men are to learn war no more. The nature of the christian dispensation, in contrast with the fierce passions of man, is beautifully portrayed by the evangelical prophet—"Every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end." Isa. ix: 5, 6, 7.

When our Savior walked among men, he inculcated the principles of peace in clear and emphatic language, and by his own shining example—"Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth—but I say unto you that ye resist not evil."—"Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy—but I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven." And in his own example, when he could have summoned twelve legions of angels to his rescue, he quietly submitted to his persecutors, and in the end offered the intercession, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." The Apostle James in allusion to this subject queries,

‘From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?’

Believing, then, that under the christian dispensation, which was ushered in with the annunciation of “Peace on earth, good will toward men,” we cannot in any way be engaged in war or contribute to its support, every faithful member of our body has felt bound conscientiously to abstain from all participation in it;—and in our earlier existence as a people, before our principles were well understood, we were subjected to the spoiling of goods, imprisonment and much suffering, on account of our religious scruples in this respect—but we dare not in the Divine sight do otherwise than steadfastly maintain our testimony, based as it is on the precepts of Him who was emphatically the Prince of Peace, and consonant with the doctrines and practice of his apostles and early followers.

Nor can we for conscience sake agree to any commutation for military requisitions; for hereby should we be consenting to the justness and propriety of the exactation. And in this we trust that those who view this subject differently from us, will discover no disposition to screen ourselves from onerous duties, but will do us the justice to believe that it is for the answer of a pure conscience unto God, which is dearer to us than our natural lives. And for the sincerity of our motives we may appeal to the history of our Society, in which no instance will be found where a consistent member has ever borne arms, or volunt-

rily paid a fine or tax as an equivalent; but has chosen rather patiently to suffer whatever might be inflicted upon him for the support of his religious belief.

Within the limits of New England our scruples as to bearing arms have generally received the favorable consideration of the different State Legislatures, and we trust that our members will continue to act so consistently with their christian profession as that they may still be deemed worthy of the immunity which has been heretofore extended.

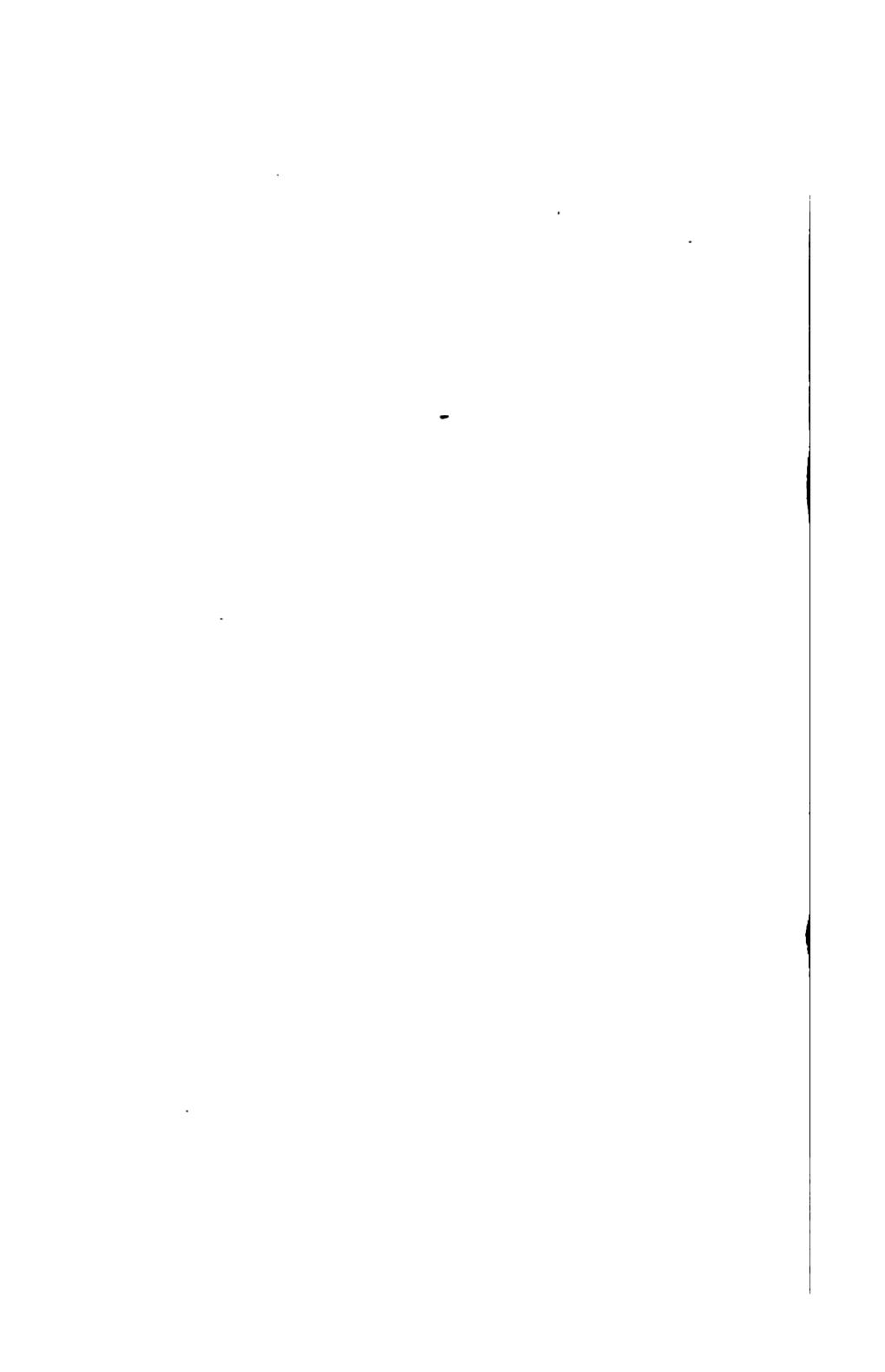
But while we have thus felt bound uncompromisingly to maintain our belief of the peaceable nature of the christian dispensation, we have ever acknowledged the propriety and necessity of human government in conducting the affairs of men, and have since our origin, from time to time, declared our views in this respect, manifesting our fidelity to whatever government an overruling Providence might place us under. Nor do we believe that in this way our peaceable principles are at all infringed upon.

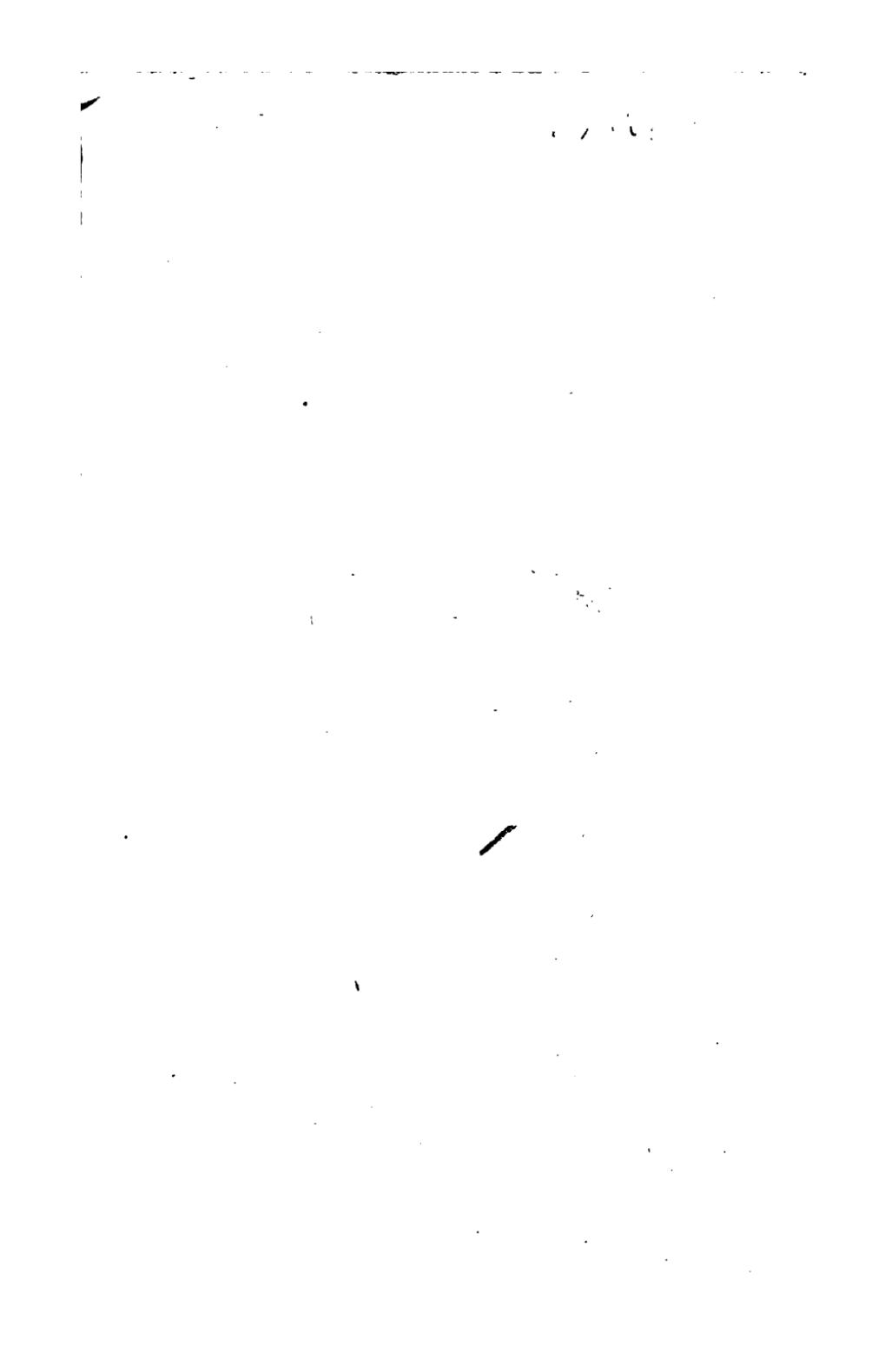
We find in the New Testament clear and undeniable evidence that civil government was fully recognized by Christ himself and his apostles; and we have ever considered it to be essential to the preservation of good order and the promotion of the happiness of man—nor have we as a Society any unity with the views of those who deny the necessity of human governments.

When the apostle Peter was inquired of, "Does not your master pay tribute?" he replied in the affirmative, and Christ upon the occasion wrought a mira-

cle to obtain money to pay for himself and the apostle. Here the authority of civil government in exacting tribute is acknowledged by our Lord, and practically complied with; and in no instance do we find that he refused to conform to it, but expressly commanded to "render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's."

We may now introduce several injunctions and conclusions of the apostles respecting governments in their own words. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordained of God: whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou, then, not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same; for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath but also for conscience sake: For, for this cause pay ye tribute also; for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing." Rom. xiii: 1 to 6. "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake; whether it be to the king as supreme, or unto governors as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well: For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.—







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praise of them that do well, such we shall submit unto, and assist in righteous and civil things, both by body and estate; and if any magistrates do that which is unrighteous, we must declare against it; only submit under it by a patient suffering, and not rebel against any by insurrections, plots and contrivances." To which the King replied, "that is enough."

Again, in an address to the King, entitled "The humble address of the people commonly called Quakers," the following language is used: "O King, we do further declare, that God Almighty hath taught and engaged us to acknowledge and actually to obey magistracy as His ordinance, in all things not repugnant to His law and light in our consciences, which is certainly agreeable to the Holy Scriptures," &c.

On the restoration of peace they addressed an acknowledgement to William III over England, &c., King, after this manner: "May it please the King, seeing the Most High God, who ruleth in the kingdoms of men, and appointeth over them whomsoever he will, hath by his over-ruling power and Providence placed thee in dominion and dignity over these realms, and by his Divine favor hath signally preserved and delivered thee from many great and imminent dangers, and graciously turned the calamity of war into the desired mercy of peace."

On the accession to the throne of Queen Anne, the people called Quakers thought themselves no less obliged than others to express to the Queen their condolence on account of the King's death, and to

testify their affection and fidelity to her, and therefore drew up an address, in which they declare "their sorrow and sense of great loss sustained in the death of their late King, William III., whom God made the instrument of much good to these nations," and assure the Queen of their loyalty to her government. "We sincerely declare that with the assistance of the grace of God, we will always, according to our christian duty, demonstrate our good affection, truth and fidelity to the Queen and her government, and heartily pray that His wisdom may direct and His blessings be upon the Queen and her great councils to the suppressing of vice and immorality, and the promoting of piety, peace and charity to the glory of God and the benefit of these nations. May the King of Kings make thy reign long and glorious, to which temporal blessings we shall pray for thy eternal happiness."

Were it necessary to our purpose, these extracts from the writings of Friends might be greatly extended, but we think that sufficient has been adduced to show that they did not view civil government as an *evil*, but as an *ordinance of God*; nor on account of its mal-administration were they willing to throw off its salutary restraints; on the contrary they availed themselves of legal assistance for the redress of wrongs.— It is stated on unquestionable authority, that "during the height of the persecution which Friends suffered, when the prisons were crowded, and many illegally arrested, it was found necessary to make frequent ap-

plication to persons in authority, for the redress of grievances. Though Friends cheerfully endured the penalty of the laws, rather than violate their consciences, yet they promptly-availed themselves of the means of relief which the illegality of the proceedings against them offered. Many of these cases involved legal questions of intricacy and moment, requiring the advice of the most experienced and judicious Friends; not unfrequently the judgment of able counsel was necessary to guard them from injury." The more effectually to attain this end, certain Friends in the city of London were appointed, who met weekly, "to whom the accounts of sufferings could be forwarded for examination and proper arrangement, and on whom the duty of applications to the different branches of the government might devolve, as well as that of advising country meetings in difficult and important cases."

If we trace the history of Society, we shall find that whenever a change in the ruling sovereign of England has taken place, Friends have ever been ready to acknowledge the authority of the government, and to declare their fealty to the throne. And in our own country, when a change of government was effected by the war of the Revolution, we find Friends, on the restoration of peace, manifested their allegiance to the government then established. Nor can we omit to refer to the example of William Penn, who as Governor of Pennsylvania, in the administration of the laws, and in his treaties and dealings with the natives illustrated the truth, which we firmly believe, that civil government may be efficiently administered without

the aid of military power—*moral influence* being, as we apprehend, that which mainly supports the fabrick of civil order; its great bulwarks resting on a firmer foundation than any outward visible means of defence."

It being then undeniable from what we have cited, and from abundant other testimony that might be given, that our forefathers in religious profession and their successors to the present day, have respected and supported human governments as essential to the peace, the safety and happiness of communities, we would earnestly exhort every individual bearing our name to be careful that the speculative views advanced by some at the present time, do not lead him off from the substantial and practical ground, which our society has hitherto maintained in relation thereto.

May it be remembered by us as a warning, that among the first evidences of defection manifested by George Keith, who early departed from the faith of the Society, was the imbibing of "notions subversive of all social order, which led him to conduct himself with great disrespect towards the civil authorities in the State; and rendered him dissatisfied also with those wholesome restraints which the Society in its church discipline enjoins upon its members."—*Diary of Alexander Jaffray by John Barclay.*

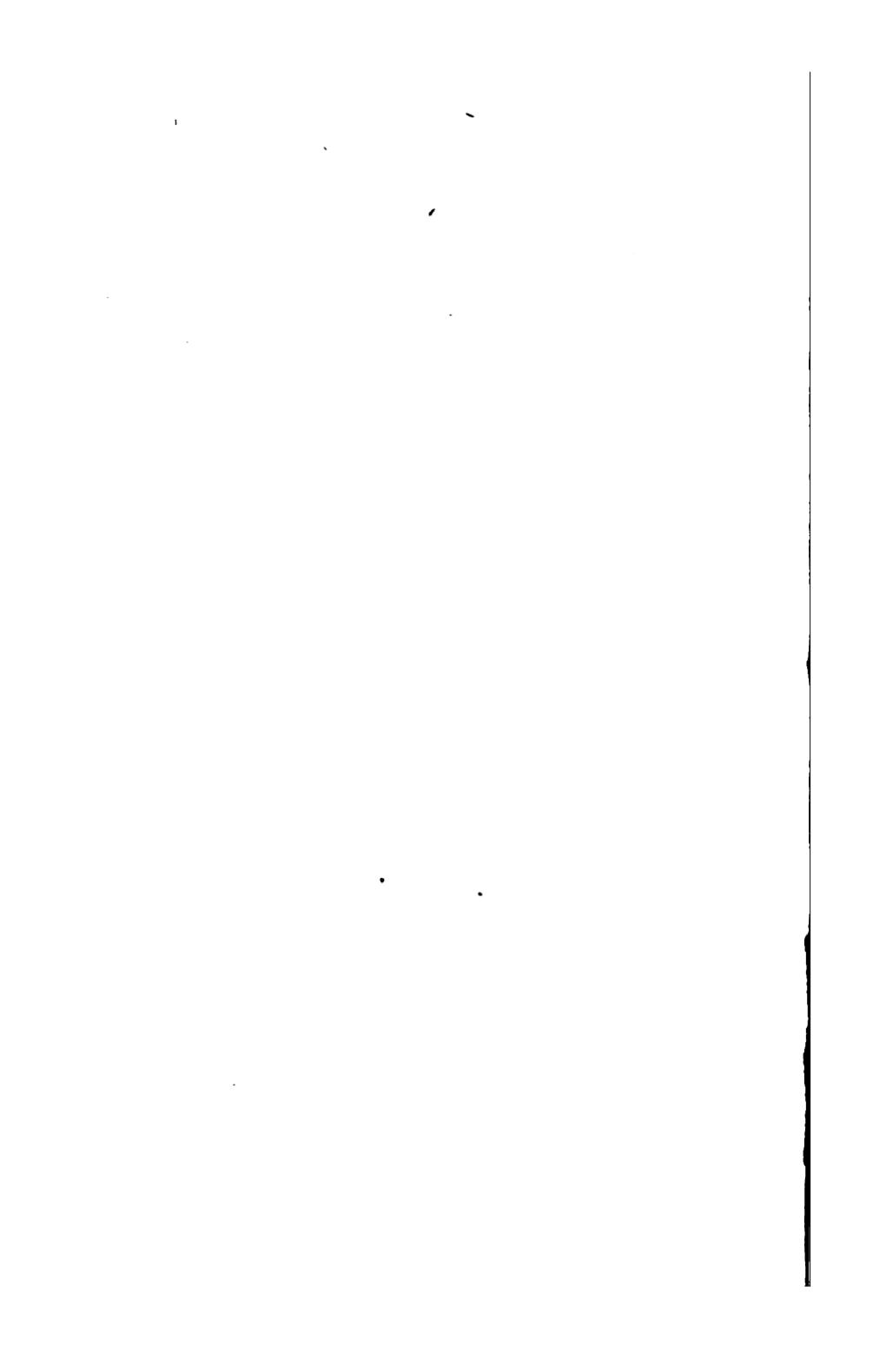
Believing that the minds of our early Friends were divinely illuminated to understand the teachings of Christ and his Apostles—that they were led to discover the truth and to walk in it—we cannot safely attempt to find for ourselves any other way. The truth is immutable—it changeth not—it is the same

yesterday, to-day and forever—and hazardous, we are persuaded, will it be for him, who confiding in some supposed greater illumination which he has received, ventures to call in question the plain practical doctrines of Holy Scripture, and the practices of those who acted in conformity to them. Rather let us in humility and meekness, and with that help which may be graciously afforded us, seek to imitate the virtues and walk in the footsteps of those who, having fought the good fight and kept the faith, have finished their course, and through adorable mercy, have been permitted to enter into everlasting rest.

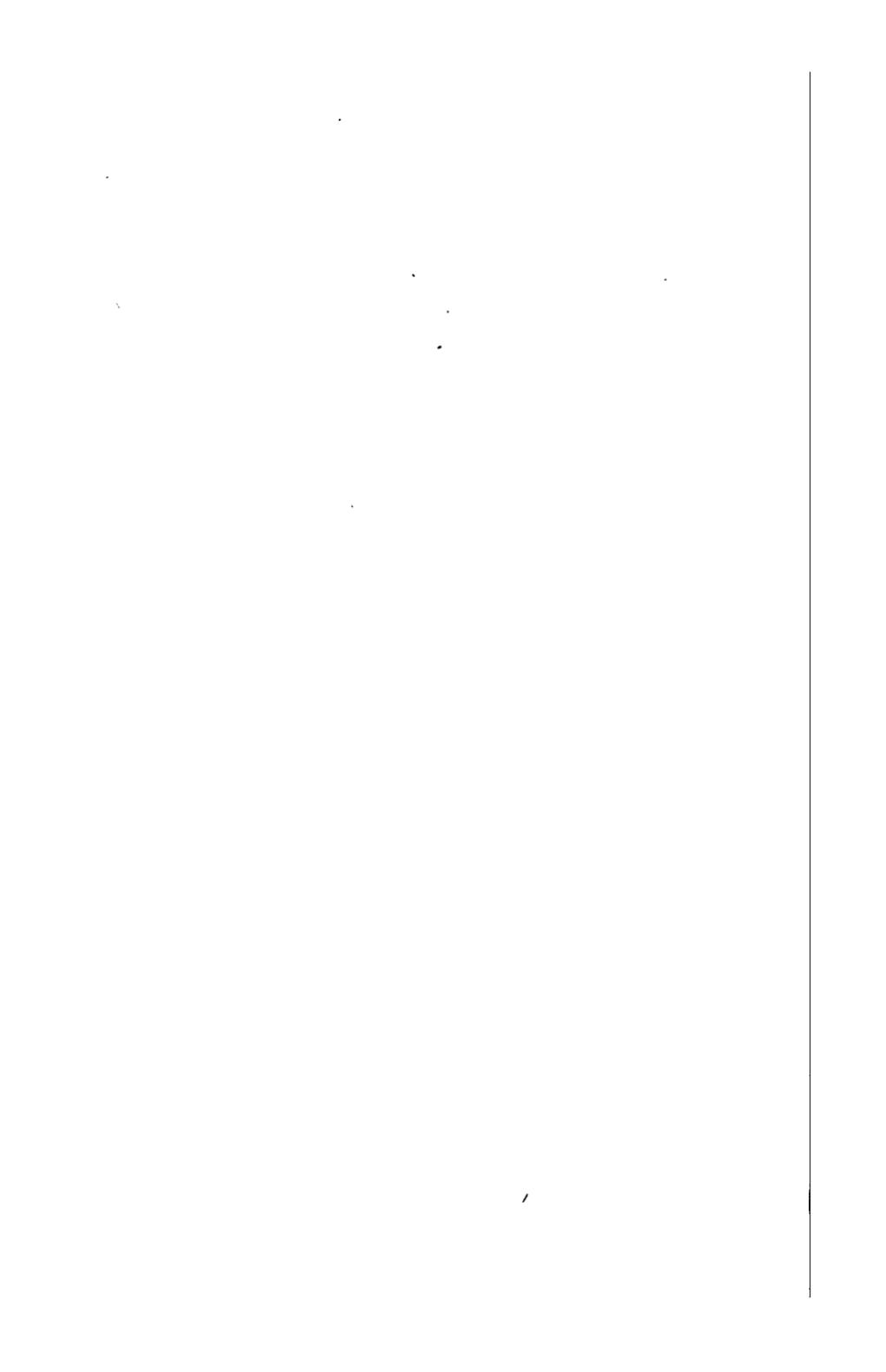
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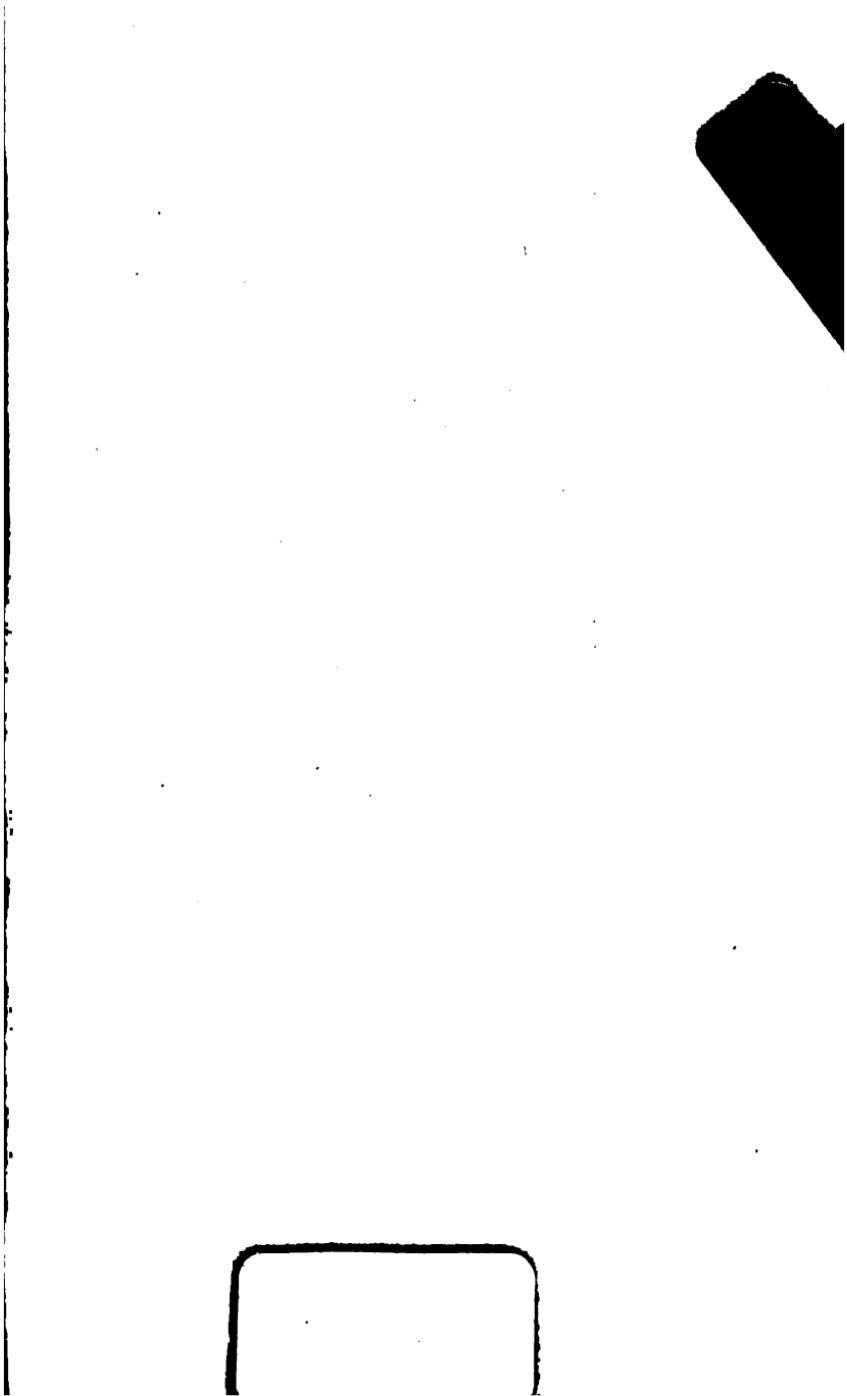
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